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978-0-521-89975-8 - The Indian Army and the End of the Raj

Daniel Marston

Excerpt

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Introduction

Provided that they [the Indian Army or IA] do their duty, armed insurrection in India would not be an insoluble problem. If however the IA were to go the other way, the picture would be very different.¹

We do not have the military force to hold India against a widespread guerrilla movement or to reconquer India . . . It is doubtful if we could keep the Indian troops loyal.²

The two quotes above highlight a fundamental, but largely unconsidered, aspect of the last days of the British Raj. Throughout complex processes of diplomatic negotiation and large-scale planning in British India and the United Kingdom, one critical element on which the success of the entire endeavour rested was the ongoing loyalty and stability of the British Indian Army. However, despite thousands of books, monographs, and articles which consider one aspect or another of this most difficult and complicated period of history for India, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom, the role and conduct of the Indian Army have gone largely unexamined.

When the Indian Army is discussed in relation to this period, it is often in an offhand or simplistic manner. Perry Anderson described the Indian Army in 1946 as ‘composed of veterans of domestic repression and overseas aggression fresh from Imperial services in Saigon and Surabaya’.³ Kirpal Singh, discussing events in the Punjab during the harrowing summer of 1947, claimed that ‘the Punjab Boundary Force [PBF] did its best to quell ever increasing lawlessness but with little success . . . because the military force under General Rees was infected with communalism’.⁴

¹ Nicholas Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power, 1942–1947*, 12 vols. (London: HMSO, 1970–83) (henceforth *TOP*), vol. VI, Prime Minister Clement Attlee to Secretary of State for India, Lord Pethick-Lawrence, 6 Dec. 1945, 271, p. 616.

² Attlee to Chiefs of Staff, *TOP*, XI, p. 68.

³ Perry Anderson, ‘After Nehru’, *London Review of Books*, 34, 15 (2 Aug. 2012), pp. 21–36 (quotation p. 22).

⁴ Kirpal Singh, ed., *Select Documents on the Partition of the Punjab 1947* (New Delhi: National Book Shop, 1991), p. xxviii. By contrast, a veteran of the civil war, Brigadier

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Introduction

The fact that the Indian Army, as an institution, did *not* collapse is a real and lasting testament to the professionalism of the force. As the events of 1947 will clearly show, there were concerted efforts to undermine its integrity from many of the same people who would later claim that its performance was unsatisfactory. The Indian Army went through a period of instability that could have destroyed any military organisation. Its experience in the events surrounding independence and partition is unique in the annals of military history and decolonisation. No other force has had to deal with such extreme and varied pressures. The Indian Army was essentially asked to prevent, or to attempt to contain, a civil war erupting among the various ethnic and religious groups from which its own soldiers, officers, and viceroy commissioned officers (VCOs) were drawn. The fact that there were isolated incidents where bias was demonstrated by army personnel is surprising only because they were not more widespread. Any military force confronted with the carnage of the Punjab would be hard pressed indeed trying not only to stop the killings, but also to prevent its own units from becoming emotionally, if not physically, involved in the situation.

No one could have predicted the level of violence that erupted or the fact that the police and the civil administration, already under incredible communal pressure, ceased, for all intents and purposes, to operate with any cohesion across much of northern India. This breakdown of law and order left the Indian Army to handle situations as best it could, operating under strength and in a situation of unprecedented social disruption. Lieutenant General Sir Francis Tuker commented that ‘Many people were encouraged to kill that summer [1947] by the almost total collapse, in the Punjab, of the legal sanctions which normally operate in civil society to inhibit such behaviour.’ ‘It appears as if there is not Government ruling over this area’, wrote a jemadar of the Indian Army on leave at Jullundur, ‘everybody [at] present [is] at liberty to kill as many [people] as he likes.’⁵

This book is an attempt to fill a significant gap – not only in the history of the Indian Army, but also in British imperial history, the history of

R. C. B. Bristow, who was engaged in the Punjab operations during August 1947, summarised thus the gap in which the PBF found itself stranded, with doctrine and history on one side, and the realities of the Punjab on the other: ‘The normal internal security role of the army was to support the civil power in maintaining law and order, but we faced a crisis in which the civil power was ineffective, law and order had completely broken down, and the reliability of the troops varied’ (Bristow, *Memories of the British Raj: A Soldier in India* (London: Johnson, 1974), p. 164).

⁵ Both quoted in Ian Copland, ‘The Master and the Maharajas: The Sikh Princes and the East Punjab Massacres of 1947’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 36, 3 (2002), p. 697.

Cambridge University Press

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Daniel Marston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

3

partition, and the histories of India and Pakistan. It will present key aspects of the Indian Army's own history – such as background, decision-making, and ethnic and officer make-up over the century preceding the Second World War – that contributed to the structure and functioning of the Indian Army as it stood in 1945. The army emerged from the Second World War triumphant, but still something of an enigma beyond its own ranks, and poorly understood by both its incumbent political masters in London, and its future political masters in South Asia. This book aims to provide a much deeper analysis of the army than has been undertaken previously, and in particular a more critical assessment of its performance during the final days of its existence.

The Indian Army's evolution and performance in the Second World War are factors that have not been fully evaluated in considering its role in the post-war landscape. The initial, crushing defeats that the Indian Army suffered in 1942 made clear the fact that extensive reforms, both tactical and social, were badly needed. The crucial political correlation to the defeats in Burma and Malaya was the chilling realisation for many Indian soldiers that, with the arrival of the Japanese Army on their borders, they were fighting for the defence of India itself, regardless of under whose command they fought. As social reforms, particularly increased commissioning of Indian officers and expansion of recruitment practices, as well as tactical training for fighting in the hills and valleys of Assam and Burma, took hold from 1943 and defeats were turned into victories, morale and discipline improved, and the rate of desertions dropped.⁶ Improvements in officer relations, spurred on by war-time Indianisation of the officer corps and performance of Indian commissioned officers, also helped to dispel the last vestiges of belief that Indian officers were second-class citizens. The fact that the Indian Army not only recovered from crushing defeats early in the war, but also emerged successful and victorious, was a significant contributor to its morale, its *esprit de corps*, and its continued professional performance. The army's image of itself as professional and successful, as cohesive and, perhaps most essentially, *non-communal*, was critical to the performance of thousands of individual men during the difficult days of 1946 and 1947.

⁶ It was reported that by March 1943 there had been 3,000 desertions in the Punjab: Ian Talbot, *Khizr Tiwana: The Punjab Unionist Party and the Partition of India* (London: Curzon Press, 1996), p. 100. The reasons for these desertions cannot be blamed entirely on political issues; one alternative explanation that has been offered is the signing bonus given to men by the Indian Army upon joining up, which could have led to multiple registrations under different names. Another focuses upon the potential communal issues in the Punjab, as described earlier. Whatever the reasons, desertions dropped significantly after 1943.

4 Introduction

The Indian Army's renaissance during the Second World War was directed and supported by a cast of innovative commanders, including Field Marshal Claude Auchinleck, Gen. Sir William Slim, and Gen. Sir Reginald Savory, among others. Their efforts to garner Indian support for the war effort, along with their revolutionary efforts to dismantle the last vestiges of pre-war prejudice against Indian commissioned officers commanding 'British white officers', were critical in shaping the Indian Army's perceptions of itself during and after the war. The officers and other ranks of the Indian Army emerged from the Second World War knowing that major changes lay ahead for India, and were committed to helping the subcontinent to prepare for independence with an army that was professional and capable.

In examining the Indian Army's role, this book will consider a number of themes relevant to the Indian Army's political and social relationships to its homeland during the war-time and post-war periods. Chapter 1 deals with the 'foundations' of the Indian Army on the eve of the Second World War – its organisation, recruitment, and evolving command structures. The second chapter provides an overview of the Indian Army's battlefield experience during the Second World War, along with the dramatic changes to the officer corps and recruitment practices during this period.

The Indian Army's experience in the Second World War also involved grappling with the military and cultural implications of a Japanese-sponsored collaborationist force, the Indian National Army. Chapter 3 focuses on the impact of this force and the trials that occurred after the war. Chapter 4 examines one of the most contentious political and strategic decisions of the post-war period: the use of Indian Army forces to re-impose French and Dutch colonial rule in their respective Asian colonies. This episode highlights how the relationship between India and the United Kingdom was changing more quickly than most British politicians could grasp.

Chapter 5 deals with the rise of a new form of communal violence – one that was well organised and orchestrated by the various political and religious parties in the areas that would become independent India and Pakistan. Chapter 6 focuses on the massive, rapid demobilisation of the army in the post-war period; the political debates that surrounded its implementation; and its impact on the volatile political and social environment of the post-war period. This chapter also examines the difficulties arising from plans to partition the subcontinent, and the ramifications of that decision for the Indian Army. The seventh and final chapter discusses the civil war that erupted in northern India in 1947 in the immediate aftermath of independence and partition, and the Indian Army's role in that conflict.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89975-8 - The Indian Army and the End of the Raj

Daniel Marston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

5

Major General J. C. Bruce, commander of Lahore area, speaking at a press conference on 3 June 1947, may have provided the best and most succinct summary of the Indian Army's position, responsibilities, and beliefs during this period:

The Army is not an inferior organization, we do not take sides, we do not fight for one community against another. Unfortunately in all countries and amongst all communities there are wicked and selfish men who are only too ready to stir up trouble and to seek personal gain from the misery of others . . . [T]he enemies against which we have now to be prepared to operate, are, therefore, brutality and chaos in whatever form these threats may present themselves and I am confident that all ranks will not only recognize their clear duty in this respect, but will be proud to show once again that forces of goodwill and sound commonsense always prevail . . . [W]hen you see fellow countrymen, perhaps even your own friends or relations, either the victims of brutal assaults, or else guided by thoughtless or evil agitation into unworthy acts or violence, you must not give way to your personal feeling for one moment. You must remember that you are on the spot as the impartial instrument of justice and truth . . . You must restrain the evil doers. You must protect and secure those who have suffered or are in danger. You must not be overcome by any desire for revenge . . . In this way you will have shown yourself a worthy member of the great Indian Army to which you belong and will have held up the noble tradition of your unit.⁷

This book will examine the performance of the Indian Army during the most testing period of its history – from the end of the Second World War, in 1945, through to independence and partition, in 1947 – and the role it played in the tumultuous events of that period. By assessing its performance across many lines of operation during this period, this book will demonstrate that the Indian Army's experiences in the Second World War were central to the role it played in post-war India, and that the importance of its involvement in preventing total societal breakdown during the transfer of power has been generally overlooked or underestimated.

⁷ 'Firm Action to Suppress Lawlessness', *Civil Military Gazette*, 3 Jun. 1947, quoted in Kirpal Singh, ed., *Partition of the Punjab*, pp. 99–100.

Cambridge University Press

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Daniel Marston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 The bedrock of the Raj: the Indian Army before 1939

This chapter will outline some of the key themes that played a significant role in the final years of the British Raj and the Indian Army. In order to understand the strains that became evident when India and Pakistan were preparing for independence, it is first necessary to see how the Indian Army had developed since the late eighteenth century and how it was recruited, trained, and organised on the eve of the Second World War.

The recruitment practices of the British authorities, and how these changed throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, are of critical importance to events on the eve of the Second World War. This chapter will consider the political implications of these practices in some depth, particularly the army's over-reliance on the Punjab and northern India as a recruitment base and its relation to the Unionist Party of Punjab. Another key theme is the expansion during this period of the officer corps, which began to recruit from the Indian population, and the British authorities' slow and somewhat resistant recognition of the necessity of this action. The practical changes in the organisation and leadership of the Indian Army will be considered, especially in the early to mid twentieth century. Finally, the army's traditional role in carrying out internal security (IS) or 'Aid to the Civil Power' duties throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries will be discussed, along with the factors involved in its apparent breakdown in the summer of 1947.

Recruitment and organisation of the Indian Army before 1914

The recruitment structure of the old English East India Company (EIC)¹ during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was notably different from that of the twentieth-century Indian Army.

¹ See the following works for more detail for this period of the EIC: Douglas Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon: Colonial Armies and the Garrison State in Early Nineteenth Century India*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89975-8 - The Indian Army and the End of the Raj

Daniel Marston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The company was divided into the three presidencies of Bombay, Bengal, and Madras, each of which fielded its own units. By the late 1750s, the British had adopted the French practice of recruiting local Indians as sepoys² and training them in 'continental' or traditional linear warfare style. However, as the nineteenth century progressed and the English East India Company became dominant, the recruiting practices of the various presidencies changed. Madras tended to recruit from the Madras region, from all classes,³ which meant that no one class dominated the army. The Bombay Army followed a similar process.

The army of the Bengal presidency was different. At the beginning of the 1760s, many of the soldiers came from the Rajput and Brahmin castes. Over the next fifty years, the Bengal Army chose to recruit almost exclusively from the high-caste members of the Awadh region.⁴ By the early 1800s the Bengal Army was the dominant army of the three presidencies, but there were those who felt that it had become too segregated. Restricted recruitment of high-caste soldiers created problems for the Bengal Army officers: high-caste soldiers would not take orders from a low-caste native officer or non-commissioned officer

(London: Tauris, 1995); Channa Wickremesekera, *'Best Black Troops in the World': British Perceptions and the Making of the Sepoy, 1746–1805* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2002); Raymond Callahan, *The East India Company and Army Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); Amiya Barat, *The Bengal Native Infantry: Its Organisation and Discipline, 1796–1852* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1962); V. Longer, *Red Coats to Olive Green: A History of the Indian Army, 1600–1974* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1974); Kaushik Roy, 'The Armed Expansion of the English East India Company: 1740s–1849', in Daniel Marston and Chandar Sundaram, eds., *A Military History of India and South Asia: From the East India Company to the Nuclear Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 1–15; Nile Green, *Islam and the Army in Colonial India: Sepoy Religion in the Service of Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Seema Alavi, *The Sepoys and the Company: Tradition and Transition in Northern India, 1770–1830* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

² From the Persian word *sipah*, meaning army.

³ See Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race, and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857–1914* (Manchester University Press, 2004); Tan Tai Yong, *The Garrison State: The Military, Government and Society in Colonial Punjab, 1849–1947* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005); Susan Bayly, 'Caste and Race in the Colonial Ethnography of India', in Peter Robb, ed., *The Concept of Race in South Asia* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 165–218; Stephen Cohen, 'The Untouchable Soldier: Caste, Politics, and the Indian Army', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 28 (1969), pp. 453–68; Douglas Peers, 'The Martial Races and the Indian Army in the Victorian Era', in Marston and Sundaram, eds., *Military History of India and South Asia*, pp. 34–52; and David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860–1940* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994). It is interesting to compare their definitions and discussion of 'classes', 'castes', martial races, and the central role of the Punjab in recruitment with Lt Gen. Sir George MacMunn, *The Martial Races of India* (London: Sampson Low, 1933).

⁴ Alavi, *Sepoys and the Company*, pp. 292–5.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89975-8 - The Indian Army and the End of the Raj

Daniel Marston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 The bedrock of the Raj

(NCO),⁵ and insisted on food being prepared to strict standards in accordance with their religious prescriptions.⁶ The Bengal Army's deployment to war in Afghanistan in 1838 also raised religious issues. As Subedar Sita Ram noted: 'The sepoys dreaded crossing the Indus because it was beyond Hindustan; this is forbidden by our religion and the very act means loss of caste.'⁷ Many soldiers deserted or discharged themselves from duty rather than undertake this act.

After the First and Second Anglo-Sikh Wars of the 1840s, the Bengal Army began to recruit from the Punjab region. The Sikhs had created a reputable army of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs who had been drilled in the European fashion. After the wars had ended, the British recruited some of the defeated army into the Punjab Irregular Force,⁸ later the Punjab Frontier Force, and some recruitment was allowed within the Bengal infantry units stationed in the Punjab. For the most part, however, opposition to opening up the regular regiments of the Bengal Army to former soldiers of the Sikh army persisted for a variety of reasons: professional jealousy, suspicion of Sikhs, and ongoing assertions from some British authorities on the necessity of demilitarising the Punjab.⁹ The sepoys of the Bengal Army also resented this incursion into their ranks by the peoples of the Punjab. Subedar Ram noted: 'This annoyed the sepoys exceedingly, for the Sikhs were disliked by Hindustanis who considered them to be unclean and were not permitted to associate with them.'¹⁰

The reluctance to recruit from the Punjab changed with the Indian Mutiny of 1857.¹¹ During the Mutiny, eighteen new regiments had

⁵ The Gurkha battalions raised both during and after the Nepal wars of 1815 and 1819 from the independent kingdom of Nepal seemed to be separate from these issues. While they were part of the Bengal Army establishment, they seemed not to have any of the caste issues that affected parts of the Bengal Army (*ibid.*, pp. 274–81). As the martial race theory dominated the composition of the Indian Army during the later stages of the nineteenth century, the Gurkhas were included in the list. However, within Nepal men were specifically recruited from certain regions, while other areas were excluded. There have been many books and articles written about the Gurkhas; some historians feel that the best comprehensive account is Tony Gould's *Imperial Warriors: Britain and the Gurkhas* (London: Granta Books, 1999).

⁶ By 1855, lower castes were formally excluded from the Bengal Army: Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj*, p. 5; see also Streets, *Martial Races*, pp. 26–7.

⁷ James Lunt, ed., *From Sepoy to Subedar* (London: Papermac, 1988), p. 85. (Questions have been raised regarding the provenance and authenticity of Sita Ram's memoirs. However, issues of service outside Hindustan and dissension between Bengalis and peoples of northern India are well documented.)

⁸ Close to 14,000 men. ⁹ Yong, *Garrison State*, pp. 37–9.

¹⁰ Lunt, *From Sepoy to Subedar*, p. 159, and Yong, *Garrison State*, pp. 42–3.

¹¹ As with many of the themes covered in this chapter, the Indian Mutiny has been the topic of hundreds of books and articles since 1857. The following books are a good starting point for understanding the complexities of this event: G. B. Malleson, ed., *Kaye's and Malleson's History of the Indian Mutiny of 1857–1858*, 6 vols. (London: Allen, 1898);

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89975-8 - The Indian Army and the End of the Raj

Daniel Marston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

been raised from the Punjab which remained loyal throughout the crisis, in both the Punjab and the United Provinces. With the Punjab Irregular Force and the new regiments, this meant that there were more than 50,000 men under arms in the Punjab who were loyal to the British suppression of the mutinous Bengal Army regiments in northern India.¹²

The military recruitment of the Bengal Army did not change dramatically in the immediate aftermath of the Mutiny, but over the next twenty-five years some significant reforms were put in place. Most of the Bengal Army was reorganised under the Peel Commission findings of 1859;¹³ however, this reform left unresolved the question of what to do with the new Punjab-raised irregulars. Ultimately a decision was made to open up the recruitment for the Bengal Army along regional lines: the Bengal Army would still recruit from across northern and central India, but would consist of many classes and races. Many on the commission felt it was best to create a system that fostered the concept of 'divide and rule' to avoid re-creating the environment that had existed prior to the Mutiny. The recruitment of high-caste Brahmins and Rajputs was decreased in response to their perceived involvement in the Mutiny, while the recruitment of Gurkhas from Nepal was expanded in recognition of their perceived loyalty and performance during the same period. Also, regiments were to recruit and serve in their local areas, which meant that henceforth only Punjab-raised regiments would serve in the Punjab and the Frontier regions. This meant that, by 1870, only 35 per cent of the Bengal Army was recruited from the Punjab.¹⁴ Many of the irregular

Philip Mason, *A Matter of Honour: An Account of the Indian Army, Its Officers and Men* (London: Cape, 1974); S. N. Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1957); C. A. Bayly and Eric Stokes, *The Peasant Armed: The Indian Revolt of 1857* (Oxford University Press, 1986); Saul David, *The Indian Mutiny: 1857* (London: Viking, 2002); J. A. B. Palmer, *Mutiny Outbreak at Meerut* (Cambridge University Press, 1966); Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Mangal Pandey: Brave Martyr or Accidental Hero?* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005); Peter Stanley, *The White Mutiny: British Military Culture in India 1825-1875* (New York: C. Hurst, 1998); and Raymond Callahan, 'The Great Sepoy Mutiny', in Marston and Sundaram, eds., *Military History of India and South Asia*, pp. 16-33.

¹² Yong, *Garrison State*, p. 48.

¹³ See Great Britain Organization of the Indian Army Committee, 'Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Organization of the Indian Army' (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1859), together with Minutes of Evidence and Appendix, multiple volumes, for more specific details.

¹⁴ The Bengal Army in 1870 had forty-nine infantry regiments, of which the Gurkhas and other 'hill people' made up four and the Punjab sixteen; the rest came from outside the Punjab and Nepal: Yong, *Garrison State*, pp. 54-5.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89975-8 - The Indian Army and the End of the Raj

Daniel Marston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 The bedrock of the Raj

regiments raised in the Punjab during the crisis were taken into the Bengal Army line.¹⁵

The anticipated threat presented by Russia and the Second Afghan War (1879–81) changed recruitment for the Indian Army again, and in particular began a shift towards the northern and north-western regions as the main recruiting area. The changes began with the findings of the 1879 Eden Commission Report, which recommended some significant reforms. Among these were the creation of an army corps that would fall under the command of a single commander-in-chief (CinC), which would obviate the need for the three separate CinC positions in existence at that time. Other suggestions included formally bringing the Punjab Frontier Force under army command, further recruitment of troops from the Punjab region, and scaling down the Madras Army.

There was considerable opposition to this plan from within the Indian Army, including from Sir Frederick Haines, then CinCI.¹⁶ The opposition to the Eden Commission's findings would be overcome with appointment of Field Marshal Lord Roberts of Kandahar¹⁷ as CinCI in 1885. Lord Roberts stated: 'I have no hesitation myself in stating that except Gurkhas, Dogras, Sikhs, the pick of Punjabi Muhammadans, Hindustanis of the Jat and Ranghur casts ... [and] certain classes of Pathans, there are no Native soldiers in our service whom we could venture with safety to place in the field against the Russians.'¹⁸ The recruitment drive to bring more northern Indians into the Bengal Army, later expanded to the army as a whole, was the product of what became known as the martial race theory.¹⁹ This assertion – that some groups

¹⁵ A number of famous irregular cavalry regiments were raised during the Mutiny: among them Hodson's Horse, Wale's or Probyn's Horse, and 2nd Sikh Irregular Cavalry were among those formally listed as Bengal Cavalry. See Lt Gen. Sir George MacMunn, *The Armies of India* (London: A & C Black, 1911), pp. 111–12, and Maj. A. E. Barstow, *Handbooks for the Indian Army: Sikhs* (Calcutta: Government of India, 1928), p. 17.

¹⁶ Streets, *Martial Races*, p. 97.

¹⁷ Commander-in-chief of the Madras Army, 1880–5; commander-in-chief of the Bengal Army (hence unofficial commander-in-chief of all three presidencies), 1885–93.

¹⁸ See C. H. Philips, ed., *Select Documents on the History of India and Pakistan, IV: The Evolution of India and Pakistan, 1858–1947* (Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 517. For an interesting perspective, see also Roberts' comments in his book, *Forty One Years in India* (London: Bentley Brothers, 1898), pp. 531–2.

¹⁹ Between the circumstances of the Mutiny and the influence of opinions of officers who had served in the Punjab, peoples such as the Bengalis and Madrassis came to be widely considered non-martial. As Thomas Metcalf noted, 'whether defined by race, climate, or personality, martial races were those who most closely resembled what the British imagined themselves to be ... they were what the Bengali was not' (*Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 127). See also Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj*, Streets, *Martial Races*, MacMunn, *Martial Races*, Yong, *Garrison State*, and Roberts, *Forty One Years*, for more discussion of the concept of 'martial races'.